

THE MAN WHO COULD HAVE STOPPED WATERGATE TELLS INSIDE STORY

by John Bryan

Egil Krogh sat in a plush San Francisco Financial District office the day I met him for this exclusive Barb interview. He seemed a bit dazed, perhaps a bit of a sales executive for a large retail firm (Swensen's Ice Cream Co.). An energetic, tall, dark-haired go-getter with the manner and style of a practical politician. He seemed destined for bigger things.

It was hard to believe that only three years before, he'd been sent off to jail for the tragic First Act of Watergate. Falsely accused of having wiretapped Krogh (then Undersecretary of Transportation and the youngest man in history to hold such high Cabinet authority) as the "chief" of the infamous White House Plumbers' Unit.

It was the September 3, 1971 break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist in Los Angeles which led straight to Watergate, trained Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy for the burglary of Demo-

cratic Headquarters in Washington, D.C. just nine months later set the tone and tempo which could only lead to the eventual disintegration of the Nixon administration.

Even when the affair became public on April 27, 1972, Krogh was still trial for another 18 months, secure in documents (the Pentagon Papers), few of us realized that the bottom had just fallen out for Nixon.

Today, a great many thoughtful observers (including Egil Krogh and Harrison Salisbury of the New York Times) can see it as the crucial turning point that it was, and still is.

(Krogh's words are his own, not mine.)

Even though the break-in in 1971 were more serious than the Watergate activity in 1972 which involved the Committee to Reelect the President. I was an official of the U.S. government, and I was trying to protect the Constitution. I'm concerned about the government's violating the law and doing it under whatever justification they want to — whether it's "national security" or "emergency" or "national defense." The justification that we made for doing that was national security. Some abstraction, some amorphous doctrine which you can believe strongly in and use to justify practically anything.

"And to me — and I spent more time thinking about that — it's the most dangerous thing that can happen in a government. Where you're able to defend conduct whether it's breaking and entering or kidnapping or mail covers or assassinating."

"I don't care who the target is. I mean, you just come to the point after awhile that you're not a national security. What kind of a country would you want to live in? Do you want to live in a country where somebody could enter my office today and take my files because someone else has decided it as a matter of national security? That's not my country. I don't care what anybody else says. And I'm fully responsible."

"I could have stopped it and I didn't. I'm not sure I could have stopped it. I did hear about it in 1971 when the Ellsberg psychiatrist break-in was being planned in that period in August when all those things were happening. It could have stopped everything. There would have been no Watergate. There would have been no nothing. Nothing like that. An entirely different administration would be in power."

"You put two people in charge — David Young and Bud Krogh — who are basically inexperienced young people who are doing something in government. You bring in two foreign agents — Hunt from the CIA and Liddy from the FBI — who are basically zealots who have not, let's say, got the kind of restraint that you should have in terms of environment, who are giving the impression that it's a matter of the highest national importance by a President . . ."

(Krogh remembers Liddy as a "brilliant guy" who was an "idealist" and "had a kind of political sense of a 'samurai' like Japanese Lieutenant Onoda who fought World War II for an extra 29 years before coming out of the jungle." — "He didn't realize that 30 years later and serve both in the OSS and CIA, 'lived in a world of fiction . . . it was a real world.'")

Krogh further explains that:

"You had a war still going on in 1971 when the break-in was planned. I think it's favoring to the President so his sense of urgency is stronger. You put all that into one spot and you reach a critical mass."

"By contrast, the standard of error of judgment of enormous proportion is made from which we're still recovering."

Despite the strongly-political drift of our conversation, the reason I'd originally

come to see Egil Krogh was not Nixon but marijuanna. Krogh had once assisted in the creation of Operation Intercept which brought a full-scale anti-smuggling blitz to the Mexican-American border early in 1969.

Krogh neither smokes nor drinks and is regarded as a "straight arrow" and strong Christian Scientist. A marijuanna cigarette has never salved his lips, but he's tolerant toward those who do.

In the service of Richard Nixon he took a strong position against marijuanna no matter what his personal feelings and he served as liaison between the White House Justice Department all through Intercept. On some days, the stuff was "killed" and "killed" — no matter what the facts.

But he's now floundered on Nixon or any other administration he's been associated with. He'd like to get back into politics someday and he's fascinated with the study of public administration. (He's now teaching a course on that subject at Golden Gate University.)

I thought it was time for a few straight questions. "Was Nixon a tyrant or a fool?" I asked.

"I'm not sure he was either." Krogh replies. "As far as I'm concerned, what he had hardly served that he was not given information that he was entitled to have from his immediate staff and not given that information because it would clearly implicate the immediate staff. And if he had known some more in 1972 that he found out about in March of 1973, he'd still be President today . . ."

"I think that there were a lot of errors indulged in in 1971 that was put together. First of all, I think there were too many of us who were too young and too inexperienced to be there . . . Nixon was a hard-driving person who wanted to do things right. He had a lot of staff people, and a zero-margin-error orientation which is ridiculous. There are more. And to put that kind of pressure on staff people at times was almost to doom it to failure. I mean, you just can't operate in that kind of environment."

"I think the basic mistakes were ever preserving the Pentagon Papers were a national security threat in the first instance. As far as I'm concerned, that was the only threat in the whole operation in the White House . . ."

Initially, assigning people to an operational unit that had no experience in law enforcement themselves and then putting them in charge and expecting them to come up with some results . . ."

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Exclusive Interview With Nixon's Chief Plumber



Former Undersecretary of Transportation Egil Krogh is now a sales executive for Swensen's Ice Cream Company in San Francisco.

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offer deals to defendants and give them immunity . . . As a personal matter, I won't accept it. I'm not going to accept it because I don't believe in it . . ."

So much for his famous "stonewalling."

But Krogh's attitude has really changed since . . . his politics, not his attitude, ideas about legality and justice.

"It's true," he admitted. "You see life differently from behind bars . . . It's a clear-cut, simple, more basic person who's driven into violation of his law . . . It's more of an accident of birth and location and race than, let's say, of talent, education or other things . . . And you don't judge people as you would if you knew what should happen as possible."

But late in 1976, Krogh and John Ellsberg, the Ellsberg psychiatrist, both quit the government and urged the federal government to get out of the business of busting pot heads (except at border crossing).

Grabs, they said, was not addressing a real problem, but a matter of local option.

I wondered whether this radical shift in public position was the direct result of serving time in jail alongside men who'd never been accused of anything. Or was it the result of Operation Intercept. But Krogh said that his prison experience was not the main factor. He realized that "lumping together" marijuanna, peyote and hard narcotics was stupid and he had to do something to help him out of the administration position around to a more sensible approach by 1970. He noted that most of his own generation — including many friends in the Washington law school he attended before going to the White House — smoked dope regularly.

"To burn the guys that I've gone to school with didn't make a lot of sense," said Krogh. "I mean, I'm not a saint. I asked if many White House staffers used marijuanna when he was there.

"No," Krogh replied. "I must say that very few people I know of were doing it. That's not to say it wasn't done."

I wondered if it was dangerous for a former Nixon official like Krogh to serve his sentence along with the general prison population. Did convicts attack him when they found out he'd once worked on the side of the prosecution?

"I had no trouble," he said. "It was miraculous in many ways. I made a lot of good friends. I still have many, many friends. I'm not seeking out somebody for their honesty or their reformation since they've gotten out . . . I accept them because they're my friends and I don't care what they've done or what they're doing today."

"I had a whole different kind of relationship once you're behind bars . . . I met many people that reached out to help me that I didn't know. I met this one guy in jail who was first week in there and he said, 'You know, I don't understand why you didn't really come to somebody like me if you wanted a burglary done. I've had 400 or 500 entries on the last two years and I'm not the kind of burglar he said. 'I really know what I'm doing. I really could have helped you a lot.'

"And I said, 'Well, I wish I had known that when I was in there. I wish I had someone who knew what they were doing.'"

I suggested that some of this sudden jailhouse comrades might have been about the same in the first place that Nixon — the first White House committee to prove public indignation over Watergate — had remained loyal to his powerful friends and had refused to testify against them.

"In fact, I think that's what I did. I already explained what a switch it was and how I wasn't . . . it's a difference in trust and a difference in how you've viewed. As a professional matter, I can understand why prosecutors have to try

all of personally conveying his apologies to Ellsberg himself. (He and Krogh are both currently residents of the San Francisco suburb of Mill Valley.) He's also told Dr. Fielding that he's sorry.

"I am with the epochal meeting with Ellsberg like . . ."

"Hello. Gee, I always wanted to meet you." That sort of thing, Krogh recalled. "I mean, you know, I've had that conversation a long time ago."

Did Ellsberg and the psychiatrist Fielding "forgive" Krogh for the burglary he supervised and which Liddy and Hunt carried out?

"I don't know if you forgive is the word," said Krogh with evident uneasiness. "I think that's understanding as to what happened. I mean, you know, I've had that conversation a long time ago."

"At the fact that you legal the game — that's one thing. But there's a personal responsibility on top of that . . ."

"I'm not sure a person like that should necessarily forgive . . ."

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